Feline Leukemia Virus

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Feline Leukemia Virus, or FeLV, is a retrovirus that causes the immune system to breakdown, making cats more susceptible to other diseases. Feline Leukemia Virus is the leading cause of illness and death of cats today.

TRANSMISSION

- saliva-sneezing, hissing
- mucus membranes-tears
- mutual grooming
- biting, fighting
- sharing food and water bowls
- urine
- feces, sharing litter boxes
- blood
- milk of nursing queen
- intrauterine transmission to unborn kittens

FeLV is most commonly transmitted by mutual grooming, biting and fighting.FeLV is quickly inactivated by heat and drying, therefore, prolong cat to cat contact is necessary for effective transmission. The virus is fairly unstable and will not survive long in the environment. Detergents, bleach, heat and drying will inactivate the virus. Not all cats exposed to the virus will contract the disease. The virus can be detected within 2 to 5 weeks after infection.

Developing Infection

Once the virus enters the body, it reproduces in the lymph tissue, which is the cat's first line of defense. About 30% of cats exposed to FeLV will become permanently infected. The cat will be ill for a few days, recover and appear to be back to normal for weeks, months or years, however, vaccination will not help the cat.

Other cats have an immune response and don't become "persistantly viremic," which means the cat doesn't carry the virus in the blood or bone marrow indefinately. They may only develop a mild form of the disease lasting three to 10 days. Adult cats are more likely than kittens to develop an immunity to the disease.

The FeLV virus may stay latent in the bone marrow for several years or confined in the body for variable periods of time , during which time the cat appears to be healthy. The disease can breakout after the cat has been stressed or medicated with a drug that suppresses the immune system.In the early stages of the infection the ELISA and IFA test results will be negative.

Diagnosis

The ELISA and IFA are two commonly used tests available for the diagnosis of FeLV. The ELISA, or the enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay is performed by the veterinarian and shows a color change if the cat is positive for the virus. False positive test results do occur occasionally, so retesting is reccommended. The IFA test, or the immunoflurescence assay, a blood sample is taken and sent to a diagnostic laboratory. The IFA test is also called the Hardy test or slide test.

The ELISA test will test positive for the FeLV virus before the IFA test.

FELV SYMPTOMS

- gingivitis, oral ulcers
- abcesses, non-healing wounds
- persistent infections
- chronic illness
- anemia
- jaundice
- weight loss decreased appetite
- depression
- diarrhea/constipation
- blood in stool
- enlarged lymph nodes
- difficulty breathing
- progressive weakness
- excessive drinking and urination
- abortion
- infertility
- birth of "fading kittens"

Treatment

At this time, there isn't a cure for FeLV. However, various antiviral compounds to treat the FeLV infection are in the experimental stages. If a cat is sick the illness can be treated, but treatment will not eliminate the virus. Many cats live for several years after diagnosis.

Prevention

Several vaccines are available for FeLV, but the USDA doesn't have standard requirements for these vaccines. The vaccine effectiveness is estimated between 75-85%. There is no vaccine that is 100% effective. Therefore, it is better to vaccinate the cat and avoid unneccessary exposure.

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